

Chapter 9

RACIAL REALISM OR FOOLISH OPTIMISM: AN AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMAN IN THE FIELD

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Defining the Problem

Since starting this essay the public outrage at the epidemic killings of black males by white police officers throughout this country has made me rethink my words. As a mother of four black males and grandmother to three black males, I understand the vulnerability and anguish of Black communities. These are not new dangers suffered by people of color, or black males specifically. These are part of a larger problem that makes the discussion of issues concerning the lack of people of color in librarianship and archives seem insignificant. I am angry and my essay reflects that anger, but I ask you to think critically about how the lack of representation, even in libraries and archives, is symptomatic of the society as a whole. If there's one thing we can be assured of, as evidenced by some of the pronouncements of our Supreme Court's new female judges, the lack of representation of people of color has a significant impact on one's understanding of injustice; i.e. shared experiences and mutual empathy have consequences that can mean the difference between valued inclusion vs. "alienated agency." Alienated agency means that not only are people alienated from what is considered normal society or what Dr. Joe Feagin terms "the white

racial frame,” but they no longer have agency, status, or a sense that they belong to that society.

Understanding the *white racial frame* helps to comprehend the structural and systemic racism within American society and why adopting Bell’s notion of *racial realism* is part of the title of this essay. The *white racial frame* theory, as outlined by Feagin, is defined as “an overarching worldview, one that encompasses important racial ideas, terms, images, emotions, and interpretations. For centuries now, it has been a basic and foundational frame from which a substantial majority of white Americans—as well as others seeking to conform to white norms—view our highly racialized society”¹. This theory is useful in understanding race relations amongst those who wish to adopt whiteness as a means of mobility in the U.S. and how that affects their interactions with African Americans. Feagin argues that “[t]erms like ‘American dream’ and ‘American culture’ are typically used to refer primarily to the values, ideals, or preferences of whites”² which if looked at from an economic perspective requires some form of assimilation to white norms in order to acquire economic mobility. In a 1948 interview, Albert Einstein is quoted saying, “Race prejudice has unfortunately become an American tradition which is uncritically handed down from one generation to the next.”³ More surprising, however, is Einstein’s statement in the same interview: “The only remedies [to racism] are enlightenment and education. This is a slow and painstaking process in which all right-thinking people should take part.”⁴ These statements are salient reminders of the enduring nature of racism.

In his article, “Racial Realism,” the late Harvard Law Professor Derrick Bell wrote that many of our more conservative Supreme Court

1. Joe R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 3.

2. *Ibid.*, 7.

3. Albert Einstein, “Interview with the *Cheyney Record*, October, 1948,” quoted in Fred Jerome and Rodger Taylor, *Einstein on Race and Racism* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 148.

4. *Ibid.*

Justices, similar to earlier pronouncements, “settled cases not by deductive reasoning, but rather by reliance on value-laden, personal beliefs... determined by one’s particular environment.”⁵ He further notes that in the notorious *UC Berkeley v. Bakke* decision, “the Court effectively made a choice to ignore historical patterns, to ignore contemporary statistics, and to ignore flexible reasoning. Following a Realist approach, the Court would have observed the social landscape and noticed the skewed representation of minority medical school students.”⁶ This is the same thinking we face in hiring decisions, promotion, and retention of people of color. Bell’s words, written in 1991, offer an amazing foresight into what has become our present, and I dare say, our future. “Today, blacks experiencing rejection for a job, a home, a promotion, anguish over whether race or individual failing prompted their exclusion. Either conclusion breeds frustration and eventually despair. We call ourselves African Americans, but despite centuries of struggle, none of us—no matter our prestige or position—is more than a few steps away from a racially motivated exclusion, restriction or affront.”⁷

Racial Realism

The combination of racism and white racial framing are systemic, facts that all people of color generally and African Americans specifically, must understand and recognize in order to adopt a mindset that deals with these realities, hence Bell’s racial realism.⁸ For Bell, who eventually had to leave Harvard due to the reality that Harvard was not interested in hiring Black female law professors, racism is not only an impediment to Black mobility, but it was so systemic that to rid itself of racism, the society would have to be fundamentally changed and

5. Derrick Bell, “Racial Realism,” *Connecticut Law Review*, 24, no. 2 (1992), 365. Accessed October 5, 2014, <http://liberalarts.iupui.edu/mpsg/Essays/Bell%20-%20Racial%20Realism.pdf>

6. *Ibid.*, 369.

7. *Ibid.*, 374.

8. *Ibid.*, 365.

that was never going to happen. Bell's notion of racial realism is meant for African Americans to stop looking for some remedies from a racist system that can only lead to despair. We, as people of color, need to start thinking of ways to protect and advance our own interests rather than thinking society will remedy inequality and injustice. As Bell notes "The Racial Realism that we must seek is simply a hard-eyed view of racism as it is and our subordinate role in it. We must realize, as our slave forebears, that the struggle for freedom is, at bottom, a manifestation of our humanity that survives and grows stronger through resistance to oppression, even if that oppression is never overcome."⁹ These are the ideas that continue to drive my career and what I personally face as an African American Muslim woman trying to find a job, earn tenure, and advance within the library science and archival fields.

Terrell Jermaine Starr's article on Alternet.org titled "Dear White People: Here Are 5 Reasons Why You Can't Really Feel Black Pain"¹⁰ has sage advice, but Reason #3 is particularly relevant to the subject of my essay: "The employment market is incredibly racist." Starr's article is about representation, the lack thereof for black people and how it is allowed to define who we are, and more importantly, how it impacts our existence in America. Representation through a diverse workforce, in all areas but especially in the library/archival professions, has a significant and strategic impact on our daily lives. Providing a population access to information and history that is inclusive, broad, and diverse gives a sense of agency to all citizens. Starr succinctly touches on many of the issues people of color face in trying to find jobs and/or to reach some economic security. Understanding racism and its impact on my job prospects and work can be daunting and defeating, but necessary to maintaining my resolve.

9. Ibid., 378.

10. Terrell Jermaine Starr, "Dear White People: Here Are 5 Reasons Why You Can't Really Feel Black Pain," Alternet.org, last modified December 4, 2014, <http://www.alternet.org/dear-white-people-here-are-5-reasons-why-you-cant-really-feel-black-pain>.

The Archives

The essays in this monograph have touched on a number of significant and important areas in the field of librarianship, but its sister profession, archives, is only represented by one other the essay, by Vince Lee. My essay will discuss how the archival field has approached these issues of inclusion, representation, and diversity from the perspective of a tenured, African American, Muslim woman at a predominantly white institution. My experience is sufficiently unique in that, as the literature notes, there are very few African American librarians of color, but for African American Muslim archivists the numbers are so small, we all know each other! A few years ago a few of us attempted to start a group of Muslim Librarians and Archivists, but it failed because there are so few of us. The notion of finding mentors or modeling leadership behaviors of predecessors is also non-existent for me within the archival profession. I don't know of any African American Muslims archivists or African American females that are directors or who lead archives within an academic environment in this country. A search of the Archivists and Archives of Color Roundtable's Directory of Members¹¹ attests that most of its members who are directors work in museums, programs, or archival environments that are not on academic campuses. There are a few African American women who lead academic libraries, but the archival world has traditionally been the domain of white male leadership, and there appears to be very little done to interrupt that paradigm. The few Muslim archivists I have met were either in government documents work or are primarily working in librarianship. I know of only one other African American Muslim woman who is an archivist working in academia, and we often commiserate!

In 2004 the Society of American Archivists, the largest professional archival organization in the world, conducted an extensive survey of the

11. Archivists and Archives of Color Roundtable, 2012 Directory of Membership, retrieved October 12, 2014, <http://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/2012%20AAC%20Directory.pdf>.

archival field titled A*CENSUS.¹² One of its four major challenges was “Ensuring that recruitment efforts focus on attracting archivists who more closely reflect the diversity of society at large.” It is interesting that none of the solutions offered included providing leadership or mentoring opportunities for those minorities already in the field. As Agnes K. Bradshaw, writing in this volume, has noted, there appears to be a real lack of awareness or concern regarding what should be done with those already in the pipeline. Most of the initiatives target the recruitment, education, and skill development of younger archivists, with almost no mention of retention for older archivists. When older archivists are mentioned, their value is in relation to “transferring knowledge”¹³ to younger members and stepping aside so that younger archivists can develop leadership skills. Putting aside all of these demographic issues in the archival field, the profession historically has been fraught with controversy.

The archival profession has had a troubling history of racial engagement as recounted in Alex H. Poole’s recent article in the *American Archivist* titled “The Strange Career of Jim Crow Archives: Race, Space, and History in the Mid-Twentieth-Century American South”; he states that “the archive is never a neutral space”¹⁴ —that someone’s biases, preferences, and conceptions of what is important have long-term consequences for what we deem historical or whose history we value. Poole’s article highlights the struggle to provide equal access to archival collections for African American historians and how, too often, it was those archivists charged with providing access who were the obstacles to that access. Poole’s discussion of the University of North Carolina’s troubling statements and practices related to segregation and access

12. A*CENSUS: Archival Census and Education Needs Survey in the United States, *American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (2006): 291-618. Retrieved November 20, 2014, <http://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/ACENSUS-Final.pdf>.

13. Ibid, 320.

14. Alex H. Poole, “The Strange Career of Jim Crow Archives: Race, Space, and History in the Mid-Twentieth-Century American South,” *American Archivist* 77, no. 1 (2014), 23.

points out that such actions were not unique, especially in the South. Similarly, access to leadership roles that can often mitigate these kinds of behaviors has been significantly more difficult for African Americans specifically, and people of color generally, in the archival arena, especially within academic environments.

Foolish Optimism?

With all of these previously noted issues in the field of archives, lack of representation, marginalization, and outright discrimination, how does one remain optimistic and engaged? I have forged ahead in the archival profession with some successes. I have always been a minority within a minority, a living example of the double consciousness that W. B. Du Bois talks about. I am also a victim of double marginality, as an African American Muslim in a society that privileges African American Christians. I bring a unique perspective to archives and librarianship just by being who I am, representing those populations that we never consider. I am passionate about my career as an archivist and take every opportunity to inform others about this wonderful profession and the work we perform as archivists. I embody and take very seriously the definition of archivists used by Mark Greene in his SAA presidential address: “archivists are professionals with the power of defining and making accessible the primary sources of history, primary sources that protect rights, educate students, inform the public, and support a primal human desire to understand our past.”¹⁵ As a seasoned archivist I have also inculcated the ideas that are central to the Society of American Archivists’ *Archival Values*, including “Recognizing that use is the fundamental reason for keeping archives, archivists actively promote open and equitable access to the records in their care within the context of their institutions’ missions and their intended user groups. They

15. Mark A. Greene, “The Power of Archives: Archivists’ Values and Value in the Post-Modern Age,” *American Archivist* 72, no. 1 (2009), 40.

minimize restrictions and maximize ease of access.”¹⁶ To facilitate access, I have presented at conferences, served on committees, and published articles in library, archival, and other peer-reviewed journals on subjects that range from Black feminist writers and Black and Hispanic art in special collections, to Islamic science fiction, fantasy, and comic book literature. My professional work, service to the profession, and scholarly publishing have resulted in my recent successful tenure bid at Texas A&M University. As noted in the letter sent to me from the President of Texas A&M University, “Tenure is an earned recognition of capability, and promotion is an acknowledgment of performance. This measure of your achievement is also an indicator of the high esteem in which you are held by your peers.”

I have done everything and attended all of the programs that were supposed to prime one for leadership in the profession, including attending the Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians, being selected for the Archival Leadership Institute, chairing both roundtables and sections in ALA, being elected to SAA Council, receiving a prestigious Archival Fellowship, and mentoring countless young people (some of whom have gone on to leadership positions) and other colleagues. I’ve developed workshops and classes, trained interns, provided leadership and service outside of the library, developed strong donor relations, written grants, developed world-renowned collections (Afro-centric, LGBTQ, Africana, and Women & Gender), published research that has received considerable notice (in that I’ve been invited to present nationally, regionally, and internationally), but yet I’ve never been given an opportunity to lead or work administratively in my library, except on a rotating basis for one committee. The numerous times I have applied for leadership opportunities in the archives or library, they have all been rejected with the note that I don’t fit the qualifications; inadequate leadership or administrative experience are the most common reasons for rejection.

16. Society of American Archivists, “SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics,” 2011, <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

Conclusions

In my career I have attempted to embrace Kenji Yoshino's concept of "covering,"¹⁷ trying to fit in and smile my way through a hostile environment. I've read about and tried to incorporate Melissa Harris-Perry's "dissemblance,"¹⁸ concealing one's true self, which is similar to Yoshino's concept. I have also tried hard not to be Devon Carbade's "fifth Black woman,"¹⁹ the one outlier to the four successful Black women, but my presentation as a hijab-wearing, African American Muslim woman always marks me as different. I have been the victim of micro-aggressions and cultural biases on many levels. This occurs not only from the majority population; because my presentation distinguishes me as a religious minority, I experience double marginality and discrimination. Even so, the courts in the Carbade case rejected her claims of discrimination based on identity performance because they viewed it as a mutable trait. So according to the courts, I should change the way I look in order to fit in; but that is basically asking me to give up my practice of my religion and how I interpret it.

My adoption of Bell's racial realism has been extremely important to my ability to maintain a balance and remain productive. I am doing my part to diversify the historical record, focusing on alternative movements and activism by people of color. In numerous ways I have used the archival and library fields as a means of resistance, concentrating on collecting in areas of the invisible and voiceless. That means I have focused on Black and Brown participation in the communist/socialist parties, revolutionary and radical movements, radical journalists, the labor industry, and those who had a substantial impact on people of color in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Much of this material is

17. Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*, New York: Random House, 2006.

18. Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011.

19. Devon Carbade and Mitu Gulate, "The Fifth Black Woman." *Contemporary Legal Issues* 11 (2001): 701-729.

concentrated in a few national archives, but these documents are not as widely held as the resources on the mainstream Modern Civil Rights movement material, or the non-violent or social activism movements of the late 1950s-1970s. I'm also focusing on other religious groups and their impact and the activities these groups chose to involve themselves in to realize the "American Dream." In the years to come there will be archives dedicated to Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, South and Central Americans, Arab Americans, Pakistani, Iraqis, Syrians, and others immigrants who have been in this country for over a hundred years, but whose lives and activities have not been documented in a systematic or organized fashion.

My embracing of racial realism understands that this is a challenge for us all, to make our repositories more diverse in our collections and collecting policies, and to reduce the feelings of invisibility and marginalization of these overlooked populations. As Bell notes, resistance can take many forms; for me in the archival world, that means documenting the humanity of all of America's citizens. In his final anecdote about Mrs. MacDonald's work for equality, she sums up my determination in the face of racism and powerlessness, when she answers his question about why she continues by saying: "... I lives to harass white folks."²⁰ I love that note of defiance, but I prefer my defiance to be have a more positive spin, "I live to ensure that people of color have a voice and are not silenced in the archival record, the library, and the informational world."

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